

Hartje Paper: John Foster Carr: Humanitarian and Advocate for the Huddled Masses

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The passage of time has obscured the name of John Foster Carr, but his impact on the lives of millions of European immigrants in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century is unmistakable. As founder of the Immigrant Publication Society and Secretary of the National Liberal Immigration League, Carr worked tirelessly to battle the racism, poverty, and inequality faced by recently-arrived immigrants. Although he wore many hats—public speaker, author, activist—Carr was at heart a humanitarian, someone who cared deeply about his fellow human beings and made it his personal mission to soften the challenges of assimilation in the United States.

During his lengthy career, Carr worked alongside hundreds of other philanthropists and members of the Progressive Party, petitioning members of Congress, imploring wealthy donors, and appearing at public functions throughout his city. The documents he left behind are a testament to the breadth of his impact. Through the sizable written record of his professional accomplishments, now kept in the archives of the New York Public Library in New York City, historians can rediscover his legacy and share it with the world.¹ In this way, scholars reveal his positive impact on American society and thereby inspire progressive-minded citizens of the modern world to celebrate and embrace Carr's legacy.

Throughout his career, Carr was quite active politically, carefully watching legislation pertaining to immigrants and urging politicians to support his cause. In a letter to James P. McNichol of the Pennsylvania Legislature on March 29, 1911, for example, Carr campaigned for a law that would provide equal life insurance benefits to immigrants, reminding the senator that "equal treatment to the alien...is in conformity both with the high principles of morality and with the spirit of our American institutions."²

In charitable spheres, Carr supported groups such as the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, which, amongst other causes, raised money to send immigrant children to summer camps outside of the city. The poster advertising the opportunity to contribute to this particular fundraiser reminded prospective donors that "such children sorely need a break in the monotony of their cheerless lives...for mind's sake and...for the future welfare of the city itself." The poster boasted pictures of frail children swimming, hiking, cooking out, and taking hayrides, activities which the caption described as "real country joy for city kids."³

Carr also battled the racism and eugenics-based thought that plagued the immigrant experience in the early twentieth century. In a speech entitled "Immigrants

Are Not Criminals: The Facts," given in November 1910, Carr fought a favorite stereotype of Nativists at the time.¹ "The truth," Carr maintained, "is that we ourselves are a lawless nation. It is not the fault of the foreigner."² And while Carr held that there was a need to teach newcomers the American ways, he was also able to strike an important balance between assimilation and coercion, the need to welcome newcomers as they were while simultaneously teaching them to be Americans. He urged immigrants to learn English and claim citizenship, but he also told recently-arrived Jews to "be proud of your race, your birth and your family."³ In doing so, Carr helped to build the rich cultural history that America boasts today.

One of Carr's most practical accomplishments was the publication of his "Little Green Books." In these guides for immigrants, written in their native tongues, Carr offered advice about how to find a job, briefly explained U.S. government, currency, and geography, and highlighted important American laws. The statutes he chose to explain to the immigrants illustrate both the cultural differences between European societies and the United States and the legal problems that the mass immigration caused. At one point, for example, Carr explained to Jewish readers that it was illegal to marry a girl under the age of eighteen without the permission of her parents.⁴ Writing for the Italians, he reminded his audience to "never give wine or beer to children," an admonition that did not appear in the books for Poles and Russian Jews.⁵ Some of the contemporary legal issues, however, spanned enough ethnic groups that Carr felt the need to include them in all versions of his book: in bold, capitalized script Carr made sure that the immigrants knew that "bigamy is a crime," and that "the fact that the first wife lives in Europe and has never been to this country makes no difference."⁶

John Foster Carr represented a group of men and women who helped to ease the difficulties immigrants faced by offering both direct aid and by acting as an advocate in the political and legal spheres. Although the impact that Carr had on American history has been largely forgotten, historians must continue to recognize him for his personal devotion to human uplift, for his tireless labor on behalf of the "huddled masses," and for his establishment of a legacy that shows the promise of progress through liberal action. The rediscovery of Carr demonstrates that careful research in history ensures that past humanitarian work is not forgotten and thus shapes a fuller understanding of the human experience.

Endnotes

¹ All information regarding John Foster Carr and his life's work was accessed through the archives of the New York Public Library during a research trip to New York City conducted by the author in October 2007.

² John Foster Carr to James P. McNichol, 29 March 1911, Box 1, John Foster Carr Papers, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library, NY, NY. [Hereafter all sources from this collection will be cited as the JFC Papers].

³ Three Page Advertising Poster from the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, Box 1, JFC Papers.

⁴ "Immigrants Are Not Criminals: The Facts," Public Speech given by John Foster Carr, 17 November 1910, JFC Papers.

⁵ "Restrictions on Immigration," Public Speech given by John Foster Carr at the People's Institute, 9 April 1911, JFC Papers.

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⁶ John Foster Carr, *A Guide to the United States for the Jewish Immigrant* (Immigrant Publication Society, New York), 63-64. Accessed through the JFC Papers.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸ John Foster Carr, *A Guide to the United States for the Italian Immigrant* (Immigrant Publication Society, New York), 54. Accessed through the JFC Papers.

⁹ *Ibid.*, John Foster Carr, *A Guide to the United States for the Jewish Immigrant*, 37, and *A Guide to the United States for the Polish Immigrant*. All accessed through the JFC Papers.